

BERLIN BOARD OF EDUCATION

March 23, 2020

MINUTES

REGULAR MEETING

Attendance: Richard Aroian
Julia Dennis
Mary Ellen Maloney
Jaymee Miller
Timothy Oakes
Adam Salina
Kari Sassu, Ph.D.
Tracy Sisti
Matthew Tencza
Student Representatives: Jenna Smalley - Absent
Ryan McGowan - Absent

Also in attendance: Superintendent of Schools Brian J. Benigni; Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Erin McGurk; Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno; Director of Pupil Personnel Services Linda Holian; and Director of Human Resources Denise Parsons.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Aroian called the virtual meeting to order at 6:02 p.m. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited. Prior to continuing with the Board meeting, Board Secretary Julia Dennis explained the ground rules established by the State for virtual meetings.

II. COMMITTEE REPORTS/CORRESPONDENCE TO THE BOARD

A. Committee Reports

Dr. McGurk reported the Curriculum Committee has not met since their last meeting.

Ms. Dennis reported the Community Engagement Committee met last week and decided to scale back budget discussions and focus on engaging the community concerning recent events through social media. At this time, the Committee put on hold the Communications Calendar, which includes the meet and greet scheduled Sunday, April 26, 2020. Ms. Dennis indicated, with information changing so rapidly, what is reported on Monday may no longer be relevant on Friday. The Committee submitted two columns to *The Citizen*, and at this point, will meet every other week and do its best to engage the community.

Mr. Aroian reported today the Governor issued an order that public schools will be closed through April 20, 2020, and a week ago Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) recommended suspending all committee meetings; however, Mr. Aroian recommended committees continue to meet virtually.

Mr. Tencza reported the Finance and Operations Committee met last Thursday morning and discussed the Budget, and although he has not received official word from the Board of Finance, he anticipates the Board of Finance will reduce the Board of Education Operating Budget to 3.2%, which is approximately a \$940,000 reduction, allowing the Board of Finance to present to the Town Council a zero mill rate increase. The Committee tabled discussing the concerns presented by the hockey parents at the February 10, 2020 Board meeting and discussed updating the 2013 study of all school buildings. Mr. Tencza indicated he did suspend all future Committee meetings based on the recommendation from CABE; however, going forward, the Committee can reschedule their meetings virtually.

Mr. Aroian confirmed the Board of Finance reduced the Board of Education Operating Budget to 3.2%.

B. Correspondence to the Board

Superintendent Benigni shared an email he received today concerning the McGee Media Center received \$15,000 from the Follett Challenge for their Quest program.

III. AUDIENCE OF CITIZENS - NO ATTENDANCE BY PUBLIC FORMAT

Cornel Boudria, 115 Skinner Drive, Berlin, Connecticut presented the following questions to the Board:

Has the district considered extending the school closure past March 27, 2020? Mr. Aroian responded today the Governor closed public schools until April 20, 2020.

How and when will parents be notified of decisions concerning the school calendar? Superintendent Benigni responded, at a minimum, parents will receive a weekly communication and receive messages through SchoolMessenger. He encouraged parents to visit the website, as once information is made available, it will be immediately posted.

Does the janitorial staff receive compensation when they work after hours or during these closure times? Mr. Aroian responded the Board decided to continue paying employees by shifting tasks and for effective use of their time. Superintendent Benigni responded custodians are considered maintenance staff, and based on their contract, if they do need to work additional hours, they will be compensated. The district will continue to have all staff members working, and at the Board's discretion, staff will be made whole.

How will the outbreak virus effect the 2020-2021 budget discussions? Mr. Aroian responded the Board has put forward its Budget, which the Board of Finance has reduced to 3.2%. A presentation is scheduled for next Monday, which will be done virtually. Mr. Aroian does not anticipate this virus will have budgetary impacts for next year.

Are there any project based distance learning initiatives planned for the elementary, middle school and high school grades? Dr. McGurk will address this question later in the agenda during her presentation.

What gaps in e-learning is the district experiencing now and how can the community get involved? Superintendent Benigni responded the number one thing the community can do is to have patience as the staff shifts, in a relatively short amount of time with limited training. The staff has put in a tremendous amount of time and energy building the resources in a short amount of time, and the collaboration that has occurred is immeasurable.

IV. NEW BUSINESS

A. Update on School Closure - Brian Benigni

Superintendent Benigni provided Board members with an update on school closure and responded to the Board's questions. Superintendent Benigni reported, once the district moved to the closure of the schools, immediately a food program was put into place to provide access to breakfast and lunch daily. Eligible families include anyone that attends Berlin Public Schools and other children in that household under the age of 18. Over the last week, a total of 2,261 meals have been given. McDonalds is donating 1,000 happy meals, which will be distributed, by a coupon, in the lunches on Fridays.

With regard to distance learning, the district applied for and was granted a waiver, which allows the district to count school days wherein students were provided with work and learning was taking place. The school calendar will stay in place with April vacation and the last day of school on June 17, 2020. The Federal Government has suspended all standardized testing for this year.

Over the last week, 800 laptops and iPads have been distributed to students in order for distance learning to take place in an effective manner. The district purchased hot spots for families that need connectivity in their homes.

The district is doing its best to keep all staff whole at this point, having them work either from home, or if they are maintenance staff, to work within the buildings. As of Monday, all administrative staff has the option of working from home but may come into the building if they elect to; paraprofessionals have received devices so they can work online virtually with students; custodial staff, at this time, are working daily; Informational Technology (IT) staff are reporting to work and at some point, will work remotely once all devices are received by staff and students; clerical staff are working remotely unless the administration needs them in the buildings; and security staff are monitoring buildings on a regular basis.

Superintendent Benigni indicated the best way parents and students can contact administrators and staff is by email. Superintendent Benigni encourage patience in this new realm as, in a matter of a week, the district has shifted the whole learning platform.

In response to Ms. Dennis's question, if the district has received any information from the College Board regarding AP testing, Dr. McGurk responded the College Board is trying to balance the idea that students want to finish their AP courses and have the opportunity to receive college credit. They have been providing free, remote learning resources and announced recently that students will have the opportunity to take a 45 minute on-line, free response exam at home.

In response to Mr. Oakes' question regarding the monitoring of grounds as there are concerns of students playing basketball, tennis, etc., Superintendent Benigni responded the security staff is to check the buildings and grounds several times a day, and if students are congregating in groups of larger than ten, they will be asked to remove themselves.

B. Update on Berlin Distance Learning Plan - Erin McGurk

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Erin McGurk provided an update on the distance learning plan and responded to the Board's questions. Dr. McGurk reported, when students left school, for the first ten days teachers were asked at the elementary level to provide packets of materials to maintain students' skills and to extend their learning, and secondary teachers were asked to post assignments, resources and activities into the online learning platforms. Since then, everything has changed. As the district begins to start distance learning on Wednesday, teachers are trying some of the platforms, and they are reaching out to parents and students to make those initial connections and explain how the process will work. Routines and structures across the elementary, middle and high schools and across department levels are being set up to ensure consistency.

Dr. McGurk indicated she has heard from a number of parents that their lives have been upended during this process, that schedules have changed and in addition to teachers planning instructions for students, they are also homeschooling their own children so the district is trying to be thoughtful about how much is being placed on families. Dr. McGurk indicated, during this whole process, she has seen an amazing amount of collaboration from the Berlin school staff, and at every level, the staff has stepped up to coordinate across grade levels and schools.

At the secondary level, teachers are generally posting 30 minutes of work lessons, activities and assignments for each course and students will submit work on a regular basis. Teachers have been asked to post hours they are available on a regular basis, in addition to instructional time, for parents and students to be able to ask questions.

At the elementary level, teachers have been assigned to work on reading, writing, math or social studies, and they are planning and preparing lessons, activities and materials for all teachers at their grade level. Teachers will send lessons, activities and materials out to parents either by Seesaw or Google Classroom. All certified staff, including art teachers, music teachers and physical education teachers are involved in the process in some way. Reading and Math specialists have been assigned to specific grades and are supporting teachers at that grade level. A master document, a primary point of contact and an administrator who will oversee instruction in each of the content areas for every grade level and subject area has been created for teachers to ask questions and to receive support. With regard to health and physical education, students will be asked to keep activity logs.

C. Update on Special Education Programming - Linda Holian

Director of Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) Linda Holian provided Board members with an update on the Special Education Program and responded to the Board's questions. Ms. Holian reported when students left school for the first ten days, staff sent home activities to engage students. In addition, Effective School Solutions (ESS) put together a plan for students, and ESS has been in contact with their students and families since that time. ESS also put together professional development for staff, which was shared with all staff in the district this morning, on how to deal with the anxiety students and families are dealing with. Ms. Holian presented a plan to the PPS department regarding their roles and responsibilities moving forward. All staff is responsible for setting up office hours to meet the needs of their students and families. Staff will be providing lessons through the different platforms, some of which will be live and some not, and if needed, all staff are ready to do live one-on-one sessions with students. After receiving guidance from Shipman & Goodwin regarding confidentiality today, Ms.

Holian will be contacting families to give them the option to participate in groups with guidance or to opt out. Paraprofessionals will be working directly with students or staff; the school psychologist and social workers are also working with grade level teams to develop weekly social emotional lessons; staff are participating in training to support student learning through Zoom, Google Classroom, Schoology and Sonday System; and the Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) has been in contact with families of students that struggle with behavior at home and to provide teaching. Students will continue to attend out-of-district school so tuition will not be a cost savings.

A schedule is being put together to continue interdisciplinary meetings with staff. As of now, the state has put a hold on all PPTs and all new referrals and testing for children have been put on hold.

In response to Mr. Oakes' question regarding grading policies, Superintendent Benigni responded discussions are ongoing. Dr. McGurk responded she has heard of a few other districts starting to go to a pass/fail grading systems for middle school and high school.

D. Update on 2019-2020 School Calendar - Brian Benigni

Superintendent Benigni indicated the last day of school is still scheduled for June 17, 2020, provided distance learning is in place for the other days. April vacation will occur as scheduled with no distance learning that week. The calendar, as published, will remain and Graduation is still scheduled for Father's Day, June 21, 2020.

E. Update on Berlin Breakfast and Lunch Program - Brian Benigni

Superintendent Benigni reiterated the schedule will be every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. at Willard Elementary School. Each child will receive two breakfasts and two lunches and on Friday will also receive breakfast and lunch for the weekend.

F. Berlin Public Schools Facilities Condition Assessments - Jeff Cugno

Director of Business Operations Jeff Cugno presented to the Board the Berlin Public Schools Facilities Condition Assessments proposal prepared by Friar Architecture for all five schools in the district. Board members were provided with a copy of the proposal. The cost for the facilities condition assessments is \$31,500.

Moved by Mr. Salina, seconded by Mr. Tencza, to authorize the execution of a contract with Friar Architecture for a facilities condition update on Griswold Elementary School, Hubbard Elementary School, Willard Elementary School, McGee Middle School and Berlin High School in the amount of \$31,500, which is a fixed fee.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 9:0; including President Aroian

V. ADJOURNMENT

At 7:27 p.m., a motion was made by Mr. Oakes, seconded by Ms. Dennis, to adjourn.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 9:0; including President Aroian

Respectfully submitted,

Julia Dennis, Secretary, Berlin Board of Education